

Too often, those looking for family history sources in England are left with the impression that only the well-to-do were recorded. This is not accurate. The major source of English research is parish registers, which record poor and wealthy alike. Manor records generally deal with the less well-to-do who lived on the manor lands, rather than the manor lords. While there are sources detailing only those of the upper class, there are also records listing only the impoverished or English poor. Many of these records are being digitized, sometimes indexed, and being placed online.

#### **PRE-1834 POOR RELIEF**

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To understand the records of England's dealings with the poor, we need to understand the history of English poor law. Providing for the poor has long been a challenge in England. Originally, monasteries provided for those in need. In 1531, the new Church of England parish officials were given responsibility to care for the poor. Those requiring assistance to meet their basic needs went to the parish officials. Each parish handled matters as they saw fit, which led to inequities between parishes. Laws regulating the administration of poor relief were enacted first in 1597, then in 1601 and 1662. A basic system governing dealings with the poor is called *English Poor Law*.

Providing relief (or, as Americans would say, welfare) for a person in need took time. Monies were collected by an appointed person from those who had land or property in the parish. An amount was assessed according to the amount and value of said land or property. Before money was given to a person in need, the parish (or civil) overseer determined the applicant's parish of settlement. Settlement was determined by a complex code of laws. As is often the case with government taxes, the tax often influenced public behavior. Hiring patterns and employer/employee relations were affected by the system of poor law. Settlement was set by birth, but could be altered by length of employment, fulfilling an apprenticeship, paying taxes, owning property,

or serving as a parish official. When a woman married, her parish of settlement became that of her husband.

Money was hard to come by, and was only given to the poor in cases where it was justified (not by indigence, but by proof of residence). The parish of settlement was not always the parish of birth, since settlement was established by birth (your father's parish of settlement), by renting a property worth at least £10 a year, by being in continuous employment for at least a year in the parish, and various other ways.

#### **PROVIDING RELIEF (PRE-1834)**

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When a family required assistance, the parish wanted to get them off relief as soon as possible. When the poor first applied, the parish held a settlement examination to determine which parish was responsible for the family. This examination included a complete history of the family, including marriage, names, ages, and birthplace of each child, and a complete work history of the husband/father. These examinations are among the most valuable records available about our ancestors.

If the parish of settlement was elsewhere, a removal order would be issued, ordering the constable to transport the family to their parish of settlement to receive assistance (whereupon, that parish held a settlement examination...).

When the family's situation could not be resolved quickly, the parish sought alternative solutions, including

- Sending the family overseas. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada strongly encouraged immigration. Parishes often paid the fare for families to get them off the relief rolls. Correspondence relating to families or individuals who were sent abroad as a form of poor relief was kept by the Ministry of Health. This correspondence has been turned in to the National Archives (formerly Public Record Office), and now appear in the record class MH12. Unfortunately, this correspondence is not indexed and has not been microfilmed.
- Sending children between the ages of 7 and 18 to apprenticeships. They would be taught a trade and the master tradesman gained an apprentice (more like a slave) to help out in return for providing room and board. The master received a payment up front for taking on that responsibility, which the parish often paid. A record of the transaction was called an apprenticeship indenture.

When an unmarried woman was expecting a child, the parish aggressively demanded to know the father. That father would be held financially liable for the upbringing of the illegitimate child. He would be required to sign a bond guaranteeing his willingness to pay the parish for the child's expenses. This bond is called a bastardy bond.

By the early 1800s, several parishes had banded together to form what they called *workhouses*, where the poor could be housed and fed more economically by providing bunkhouses and serving common meals. Another incentive for workhouses was the ability to put the poor to work, producing

some product whose sale would be used to offset the cost of care for the poor.

## **POST-1833 POOR LAW**

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Despite laws to standardize, some parishes were more lenient than others and rate payers often complained of high rates (taxes) for the maintenance of the poor. Some felt that the poor were getting a free ride and should work for what they get. Others felt that by combining the efforts of several parishes, costs could be held down and thus, poor rates lowered. A central place where the poor of several parishes could be sent to receive communal meals and perform work for their food was called a workhouse.

Poor Law Unions with a workhouse, governed by a civil board of guardians, were established in 1834. Sometimes the terms "old poor law," and "new poor law" are used to denote before or after 1834.

Poor Law Unions were governed by a civil Board of Guardians. The records of the poor ceased to be kept by the individual parishes, and were from 1834 kept by the Poor Law Unions.

## **POOR LAW RECORDS**

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Poor law records deal with providing food, shelter, and sometime work for those who had none. Pre-1834 records include:

- settlement examinations
- settlement certificates
- removal orders
- bastardy bonds
- minutes of meetings
- accounts
- apprenticeships
- and more.

Many records include names, dates, places and ages, while some are merely statistical.

Until 1834, poor law records were required to be kept by each parish in a chest. They make up a major portion of what are called *parish chest records*.

Workhouse records (since 1834) tend to be even more extensive than previous poor law records and include:

- Board of Guardians minute books
- Ledgers and Accounts
- Admissions and discharges
- Orders of removal
- Orders for medical relief
- Orders for maintenance under 1845 Bastardy Act
- Registers of various sorts, including:
  - Births, baptisms, deaths, burials
  - Indoor relief granted
  - Paupers' next-of-kin
  - Children under control of the Guardians
  - Children boarded out
  - Leave of absence
  - Bathing register
  - Vaccinations
  - Inmates own clothing
  - etc. etc

## **FINDING POOR LAW RECORDS**

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Many of the records described above survive. Prior to 1834, they were kept by the parish and therefore appear amongst the records of the individual parishes, often now held by the County Record Office. After 1834, they were kept by the poor law union and have since been deposited at the local County Record Office. Where a Poor Law Union straddled county borders, or where boundaries have changed over the years, records may have ended up in more than one record office.

Many poor law records have not been filmed. For a complete listing of all poor law records that survive, see the Jeremy Gibson booklets

(FHL # 942 P37gj, 4 volumes) described below. These volumes can be purchased online from the Federation of Family History Societies ([www.ffhs.org.uk](http://www.ffhs.org.uk)) or from GenFair ([www.genfair.com](http://www.genfair.com)).

## **FINDING POOR LAW RECORDS AT THE FAMILY HISTORY LIBRARY**

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The Family History Library collection contains many poor law documents. Those kept by the parish are most often part of the parish chest materials. Most recently, filming of the post-1834 poor law union records began.

Poor law records can be found in the Family History Library catalog under one of the following subject headings:

ENGLAND, [County], [Parish] - Poorhouses, poor law, etc.

ENGLAND, [County] – Church records **or**  
ENGLAND, [County], [Union name] -  
Poorhouses, poor law, etc.

(Some catalogers may be creative and record them under another subject heading)

Note that a few counties have made efforts to index some or all of their poor law records. See [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org) for Norfolk or Cheshire, [FindMyPast.co.uk](http://FindMyPast.co.uk) under institutions for Lincolnshire, Wiltshire, and Manchester or use the extensive digitized (but not indexed) London poor law records 1834-1940 at <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1557>

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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A full explanation of the poor law system and maps of the poor law unions established in 1834 is online at [www.workhouses.org](http://www.workhouses.org). This site explains conditions in the workhouses, gives examples of records, and gives information on every poor law union and workhouse in England. They have current

pictures of the workhouses (they still exist), copies of the 1880 census listing the inmates (those housed in the workhouse are called inmates), and much more. The website is a good educational experience even if you don't use it to locate records about your ancestors.

To find the poor law union for your ancestor's parish, use

- <http://maps.familysearch.org> or
- Mary Mills Hallett's web site at <http://www.fourbears.uk.com/Unions/Poor%20Law.html> or
- Gibson's Poor Law Union Records (4 vols, see below).

For help with terminology used, see **The Local Historian's Encyclopedia** (John Richardson, FHL 942 H2rjo 1986), **The Dictionary of Genealogy** (Terrick V. H. FitzHugh, FHL Ref 942 D26f) and **The Family Historian's Enquire Within** (Pauline A. Saul, FHL Ref 942 D27mf 1995).

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Wiki research articles on Poor Law Records (a list): [http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Category:Poor\\_Law\\_records](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Category:Poor_Law_records) (look for "records" in title rather than just "unions" in title)

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